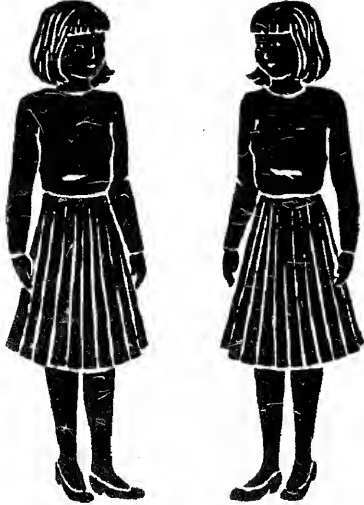


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## Women in the Childbearing Years: Sharing our Stories - Again

Five years ago the MCC Committee on Women's Concerns began collecting stories from women about their experiences with family planning, childbearing and child rearing, or as single women in a society where marriage and family are seen as the norm. The "Childbearing Project," as it came to be known, was born out of a desire to respond in a helpful way to the abortion issue. It was soon broadened as the committee began to understand that abortion was only one aspect of a much larger question about the roles women play in their families and in society. The committee hoped to use these stories in a variety of ways to help the church find authentic means of ministering to women as they grapple with their roles in a changing and often confusing world.

A sampling of those stories appeared in the January/February 1987 (No. 70) issue of *Report*, "Sharing Our Stories." More stories, this time from sisters in developing countries, appeared in the November/December 1989 (No. 87) issue, "Women Around the World: What Are Their Options?" The committee hoped that by looking at the issue in a broad social and geographical perspective, more understanding could be reached about the decisions women make in their particular settings.

Now, in this special, extended issue we want to share a representative sample of the rest of the stories received. I am sorry that space does not allow us to share all of the stories we received.

These are stories of joy, pain, courage and fear in the midst of difficulty. Some are not easy to read. They are honest confessions about decisions that shaped the lives of the women who wrote them. When these stories were solicited, it was specified that writers' names would be held in confidence; names of persons and places have been changed to protect confidentiality.

You may disagree with some of the decisions made, but I hope hearing these stories will help you empathize with women in the situations in which they find themselves, often in circumstances seemingly beyond their control. How can we help one another find grace in the midst of our suffering? How can we rejoice with one another in times of triumph or joy? How can we, the church, minister to our sisters and brothers in the unique and common places of our lives?

I first began working on the Childbearing Project in the fall of 1988, just before the birth of my daughter. As I read through these stories I was reminded of my own struggles with two miscarriages, one on each end of two years of being unable to conceive. I identified with the single women who struggled to find acceptance and love in a society geared toward marriage and child rearing. I was reminded again that there are seldom easy solutions to the problems we face, and that love and patience are often the only tools we have to work with.

It has been a long time since the Childbearing Project was first conceived. Some of our dreams for the project proved too big for the committee to handle, and we regret our inability to develop resource materials from the stories as we had hoped. But we believe sharing our stories is an important step in ministering to one another. We encourage you to read these stories with care, discuss them with others, and find ways to use the understanding you gain to better understand your own story and the stories of those around you.

"Therefore, . . . lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love" (Eph 4:1-2).

—Lori Matties, compiler

**Lori Matties was a member of the Committee on Women's Concerns from 1988 to 1990. She lives with her husband Gordon and their two children, Zoe and Jesse, in Winnipeg, Man. They are spending this winter in Jerusalem on a study leave.**

**"Like many ambitious parents wanting to do things perfectly, we attempted to do everything we had done prior to having children..."**

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## Childbearing and Careers

My husband and I are from the generation of career people who elected to put off having children until our careers were well on their way. We were married in our late 20s and were established in our careers by then. Having children was an issue we had discussed at length and decided upon before we committed to each other.

My husband and I came from somewhat different backgrounds, although we both were raised in rural parts of the eastern United States. We were brought up in two different denominations, but the expression of our religions were similar in our families.

We were both living in an urban area when we met. That caused us to look at and sort out how we wanted to raise our children, as many of the rules that worked for our parents worked differently for us.

Our decision about when to have children came as a result of a number of factors. Age was probably one of the biggest. We wanted more than one child, so we knew that we did not want to wait until we were 35 to begin. Emotional readiness was another factor. I chose to undergo some therapy to help prepare emotionally for this phase of our lives. Close friends were beginning to have children, and their support was helpful. Our extended families were less involved because we were living 2,000 miles from them. We were not actively involved in the church then and did not have close friends there, so neither of those had a big impact.

We intended to have two children. My husband had strong feelings about having no more than two. We wanted our children spaced fairly close together so they could grow up together. Although we were only marginally involved in church activities when we were deciding to have children, I felt strongly that I wanted my children to be involved and exposed to Christianity through the church. It was clear that my husband did not want to be a part of organized religion. At that point, I spent some energy working through old expectations that we would be involved in church as a family. I recall feeling very sad as I realized it would not be a possibility unless my husband changed his feelings about organized religion. I recall deciding to take responsibility for that part of my children's education and exposure, and I continue being responsible for that in our family.

My first pregnancy came after several months of trying. We had used birth control previously and consciously planned when we wanted to have our first child. Several months of trying led to some frustration, but the pregnancy eventually occurred. I worked full-time through the entire pregnancy and planned to take a leave of absence and return to work part-time.

The pregnancy was uncomplicated. Living in an urban area provided the needed medical and support services. Lamaze classes were available and we utilized those. Support during our pregnancy came from friends and extended family even though they were far away.

Our son was born via a Caesarean section after labor failed to progress on its own. The majority of our support after his birth came from friends. Paternal grandparents also came after his birth to share in the excitement. We joined a co-op of mothers of young babies for babysitting purposes. This became a support group for us and provided good, dependable childcare when we needed time away.

Finding childcare so I could return to work was more difficult. We finally advertised in the paper, interviewed people and found someone to come into our home to care for our son. At that point our income level was such that I did not need to work for financial reasons. However, returning to work was important for my career. With some modifications I was able to return to work four days per week.

The first year with our son was a stressful one, not because he was difficult, but because we had difficulty adjusting to being parents. Like many ambitious parents wanting to do things perfectly, we attempted to do everything we had done prior to having children — recreation (skiing), house projects and traveling. This only led to frustration and feelings of inadequacy.

We agreed that caring for our son would be a shared responsibility, and both participated in his care, but the primary responsibility was still mine. I had to make childcare arrangements. Because of working hours it was my job to take and pick him up at the day-care provider's. Retrospectively, I think my husband would have participated more in that whole process if I had allowed him to. I felt it was my job, and so I did it.

We had been accustomed to doing projects together, playing together, etc., all of which changed when our son arrived. My husband did not see the need to give up the activities he enjoyed previously, including week-long backpack trips with his friends. I felt all of that would be given up since we had a



child, and I felt abandoned and rejected as a result of his decision to continue those activities. We slowly worked through those differences, and as the end of the first year of parenthood approached, we began to feel more comfortable with our role as parents and with our expectations of life. Around that time we participated in a Marriage Encounter weekend, and this helped us discover some new ways to communicate and identify our strengths and weaknesses. Extended family was still 2000 miles away and provided what support they could from afar.

As our son approached 18 months, we began thinking about a second child. I became pregnant shortly thereafter. About the same time, a job opportunity came for my husband 800 hundred miles away — 800 miles further from our families. My husband was eager to take it, so I reluctantly agreed. Three months later we left the strong support system of friends and other young parents to go where I knew no one and where there was not even a Mennonite church. I resigned from the job I loved and where I felt successful. We sold our home, loaded our belongings into a moving van and moved north.

I felt as if everything was being taken from me. I had worked hard to get ahead in my career. I knew I would want to reduce my working time when I had a second child, but in my

current job I had been in a position to do that without losing benefits and salary. Resigning that job meant leaving all of that and beginning again. I felt lonely, useless, and angry. It was my first adjustment to not having my profession as a main source of meeting my needs. I also had no friends or support system. I went from the most up-to-date medical care in a large urban area to medical care in a small town with only one obstetrician. Looking back, I can see that experience was a growing one, but it was also very difficult.

My second pregnancy was again uncomplicated and resulted in the birth of our first daughter. I again had a Caesarean section and felt I received adequate medical care. I missed the caring friends that had been so helpful when our first child was born. Being still quite new in town, there were fewer people to share in the joy of our daughter.

Adjusting to two children was much easier than adjusting to the first one. Even though we were kept busy changing diapers and physically caring for these two little ones, we soon felt the completeness of being a real family. With two children, we knew all of those extraneous things we used to enjoy doing would be put on the back burner for a while.

During this period I was at home full-time, and when our daughter was nine months old I was ready to get out a bit. I found some part-time work at the local health department and found childcare without difficulty. This provided a wonderful outlet for me and extra spending money. It helped meet some of my professional needs.

I remember those years as being very busy. My husband participated in the care of the children. It seemed that it took every waking minute to meet their needs, maintain a household and work at our jobs. We shared time off from work when the children were sick as my job was fairly inflexible. My husband traveled a fair amount on the job, and that added to my work when he was gone. Because he participated in all aspects of childcare, I was able to arrange my schedule to work on days he was home, so the children could be his primary responsibility some of the time.

My third pregnancy was quite a surprise to both of us. We had discussed what we would do if I should get pregnant again. My husband was firm that we should have no more children. I had not felt comfortable getting sterilized after our second daughter was born, although that would have been easy. So our third child was conceived while we were using birth control. My husband was able to work through his feelings, and we proceeded with the pregnancy. Again it was uncomplicated, and at the end came our second daughter.

**"What the Mennonite church has to offer in parenting seems limited and narrow in focus. It has not offered me much help in thinking about how to raise my children in an urban environment."**

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Because of my age, I elected to have an amniocentesis, so there were few surprises. We even named her before she was born.

By that time we had many friends and a nice support group in our new town. This time there was no question regarding sterilization, and a tubal ligation was done at the time of delivery along with the Caesarean section. I was able to have a year of maternity leave but elected to take only four months and then returned to my part-time job.

We spent three years living in a small town and learned to love the people and enjoy life there. Because of our income (my husband is a federal employee), we found ourselves in a much higher income bracket than most of the people around us. That was a big contrast to our experience in the city. With my part-time income, we had a very comfortable lifestyle.

Since there was no Mennonite church there, the children and I became involved with a Methodist church and found it to be a worthwhile experience. I was impressed again and again with their vision and involvement in social issues. I participated in several seminars on goals in my own parenting. Interestingly enough, our original Marriage Encounter was done through the Methodist church.

A year after our third child was born, we had the opportunity to return to the urban area from which we had come and we (together this time) decided it was time to return. Coming again to the big city with three small children held many changes and adjustments. My husband was transferred, but for me it meant another new job. We needed a larger home for three children and found home prices were much higher, as were childcare, pre-school, and many other expenses. I again worked part-time. Starting over meant my salary increase was much less than our expenses and as a result we needed to become more frugal. We found ourselves surrounded by many people who were more affluent. We found it a greater challenge to maintain a simple lifestyle and not get caught up in the materialism around us.

As our children reached school age, I began considering returning to work full time. Because of expenses and convenience, we decided to attempt to get someone to live with us to participate in the care of the children. We applied to the MCC Visitor Exchange Program and for four years had a trainee live with our family and help care for the children. This enabled me to return to work full time. This was largely a positive experience for our family. Our visions were broadened and the exposure was beneficial for all of us (hopefully, trainees included). We are grateful for their

contribution to our family and have many fond memories of life with them.

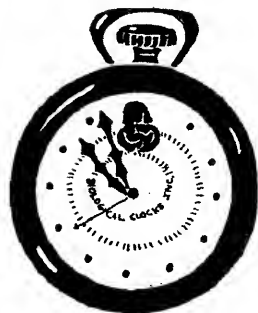
Now our children are old enough and we again are managing on our own with mom working full time. I have a job with considerable flexibility so car pools can still be run and children can be involved in many activities both at church and in the community.

Returning to the city meant that we again could be involved with a Mennonite church. The children and I got involved in the Sunday school activities. We have gotten to know more people in the church and are finding it a greater support system than before. Our children are finding friends and becoming involved in appropriate activities. We are looking forward to greater involvement, especially in the areas of parenting and childbearing.

Parenting has been somewhat of a mixed bag for us. Overall it has been largely positive. Watching our children grow and thrive has been rewarding. Seeing them grow into independent, caring individuals has been most delightful. (We are remembering that they have not yet reached the age where all of that may turn around.) Given the decisions we chose to make around the time we had children, I have few regrets. The choices we made meant the road we traveled may not have been the easiest, but the bumps and ruts helped us become better people and parents as a result. We are wiser, more caring and more sensitive as a result of our experiences.

It is difficult to think what I might have done differently as a parent if given the opportunity. One thing that comes to mind is that I wish we had been more financially astute. We did not begin long-range financial planning soon enough. Had we done that sooner, the moving and changing salary levels might have been slightly easier.

I would say our marriage relationship and parenting thus far have been affected most by Christians outside the Mennonite church. It seems what we needed or sought after was not available through the Mennonite church. What the Mennonite church has to offer in parenting seems limited and narrow in focus. It has not offered me much help in thinking about how to raise my children in an urban environment. I think it could have a much greater impact in this area. With more and more Mennonites living in urban settings, there comes a new and interesting challenge of how to incorporate what's Christian and what's Mennonite into a meaningful and fulfilling life for us and our children. •



## Never Married

I am 31 and have never married. I have not chosen to be single or childless, nor do I feel too old should I still choose to marry or have children. I am not old enough to have regrets nor to call myself childless by choice, or no choice.

I have led a very full life. I've traveled a great deal and worked in several different countries as a teacher. Perhaps riding on the momentum of the 60s, I chose to find out who I was rather than search for a husband, as my mother's generation did. I cannot say I was particularly career-oriented, but certain things were extremely important to me, and I've enjoyed studying. I've always felt that one day I will have a Ph.D., but I am not sure in what, for my interests are many.

Recently I have thought more about marriage and having children. I guess that is mostly because my "biological clock is running out." I never wanted to set marriage as a primary goal, for fear that if it did not happen, then my life would be a failure. But having children would mean a great deal to me. I have been studying the histories of the families from which I come. The legacies have been great, and I would hate for them to end with me. So in some ways I feel responsible for carrying on the family.

In the back of my mind I've thought that modern technology could help me have my own child, but the thought of supporting myself financially and doing it alone scares me. I also have thought of adopting children from the Third World, but first would need to resolve many things within myself. I feel sorry for my parents who want grandchildren. In many ways I feel unfairly rushed into considering these issues, because of my biological clock. •

## Accepting Singleness

I think I have finally accepted my singleness, but it has not been easy. My one goal has always been to marry and have children. I also felt a call to be a missionary. I planned to meet my husband in college, marry after graduation, and then go to the mission field. Things did not turn out that way. I graduated from a community college with an AA degree in social work and then went into Voluntary Service.

Near the end of my term, I met a man who I was sure was right for me. We got along so well, and did so many things together. Unfortunately, we had different ideas about our relationship. "John" only wanted friendship. He told me this many times. I, however, was sure that love would win out, that John was only trying to deny his true feelings. I wanted a deeper commitment, one that would lead to marriage. As I made more demands on our relationship, John drifted further away. Our relationship ended when I went back to college for a BS degree. I was sure while I was gone, John would realize how much he missed and loved me. That did not happen. Instead I became very bitter.

I was 23 and alone. What was wrong with me? I took myself apart: *I am an attractive woman; I should have a man. It's not fair. There are unattractive women who are happily married. Maybe I would find a man if I flirted more, or wore makeup. I am too independent. I want to get married and men can sense that and are afraid.* On and on it went, and I felt more depressed.

Friends and family were no help. I had several good male friends. While I never thought of them as future husbands, it still hurt when they talked about their girlfriends or when they said, "You are such a neat person. I do not understand why you are not married." My girlfriends were experiencing the same struggles since most of them were also single. I felt guilty for burdening them with my problem since they were in their late 20s and early 30s, and at 23 I was still young. My relatives were the worst. The four or five times a year I came home for a visit, they would ask why I was not married. They were always trying to fix me up with someone and I felt like a charity case.

I was angry at God. If I was not to marry, why did I have these strong yearnings for a family? Why didn't God send me

**"I am worthwhile, and God loves me single or married. I just wish the church would teach and believe that."**

a husband? Or if not a husband, why wouldn't he give me peace?

It took a year, but God gave me peace. It came in unexpected ways. One way was through the birth of my nephew "Randy." Randy is like a son to me. I love him so much. I do not see him often, since he lives 200 miles away, but I think of him often. He filled an empty spot in my life. Another thing that gave me peace was the engagement of my friend "Bobbie." She was afraid to tell me at first, because she felt guilty for being in love! I was happy for her. She gave me hope. If she at 28 could get married, maybe I could too. Since then another friend, age 34, has started seriously dating.

More recently messages from God have given me peace. I have two charismatic friends who do not know each other. Both gave me the same message from God: "I have plans for your life. It is not time for you to marry now." This really helped my self-esteem. I always thought I was single because there was something wrong with me. Now I understand God has a plan for my life. Marriage may come someday. However, even if it does not it is not because I am an undesirable person. I am worthwhile, and God loves me single or married. I just wish the church would teach and believe that. •

## Illness and a Hysterectomy

Twelve years ago when I was 15, I began to get bad pains in my stomach and feel dizziness. For a long time I didn't tell anyone about it. I don't know why. I guess I was just quiet. I stayed in my room a lot. But after more than a year, I got so depressed and scared that I tried to tell my mother something was wrong. But she wouldn't listen. Later she explained, "A mother doesn't like to believe her child is really sick."

The pain was getting worse. Sometimes it was so bad I could hardly stand up. A couple of times it made me go to the nurse's office at school. Shaking and sweating, I passed out on the bench there. I woke up in a bed. The nurse came and sat beside me. "What did you take?" she asked. What?? She assumed I was going through withdrawal! I told her I hadn't taken anything—that I was sick. But it was no use. I appeared to have taken drugs, and she was determined to get me to confess. Even now, my heart beats hard as I remember the scenes. I didn't know what to do. I wished I had someone who would listen.

More than once I tried to kill myself. I became obsessed with the idea of suicide. I figured whatever I had was probably killing me anyway, the pain was so bad. There was no one to help me. The only relief was sleep. But I was afraid to sleep



because I never knew if the pain would be better or worse when I woke up. I'd take a knife, a very sharp knife, and hold it to my stomach—I was so mad. Then a wave of pain would come, and I'd pass out. The knife would fall from my hand, and I'd sleep for a long time.

Finally in desperation I went to our family doctor. Finally, a doctor—I'd get some help at last. I was sitting on the examining table when the doctor walked in. She closed the door and said, "Come on now, you can tell me. What did you take?" I was crushed. At 16 I saw no hope. There was only



**"There was no rational cause for hope, but I still hoped. I hoped that one day I would be free from pain."**

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pain ahead as far as I could see. There was no help, no support from any of the people around me.

Eventually, I looked elsewhere for help. I looked within. My beliefs about God are fuzzy, but in the depths of depression and misery I found a hope and strength that carried me. The hope and strength were not from me, but I could turn to them within me.

This strength, however, could not protect me from suicide. When I was on my knees alone in my room and the pain was so bad I could hardly see, making that pain stop was my only thought. At those times my body prevented me from thinking clearly. But between bouts of pain this relentless hope was there. There was no rational cause for hope, but I still hoped. I hoped that one day I would be free from pain.

After more than three years of this (an eternity), at age 18 I had a laparoscopy—exploratory surgery. I had passed out on the floor at my parents' house while not in my room. They took me to the hospital. I had endometriosis. What a relief to have a diagnosis—even if I didn't know what it meant. There was a name at last.

Endometriosis is very difficult to diagnose because its symptoms vary greatly. Some women suffer pain with their periods and some have pain all the time. Some women have no pain at all. Endometriosis causes a sort of internal bleeding which can interfere with the normal function of one's internal organs (usually in the abdomen). It is one of the leading causes of infertility in women. My case was unusual because it developed when I was 15, not 30.

My doctor did not tell me much about the disease. I guess he did not think I needed to know. I didn't know there were different forms of treatment and that I could have some say in which one I received. Over the next few years I was given various medications—none of them entirely successful in warding off the sudden bouts of pain (which lasted for days). I was still afraid I might kill myself by mistake during one of those bad times.

When I was 21, I had a bout of pain so bad I thought the disease had finally done some major internal damage and I wondered if I was going to die. My brother took me to the doctor, and I was given three injections over the next half hour—demarol, morphine and something else. The pain didn't subside immediately, but eventually I passed out from all the heavy medication. My brother had to carry me into the house.

I woke up a day or two later with yet another treatment in my hand. The doctor had prescribed percodan (another very strong pain killer) and a new medication, which I was to take for nine months—at \$150—every 25 days! At the time I was finishing my Bachelor's degree in Education and had just begun student teaching full time. This was a heavy financial burden.

In the next months I focused all my thoughts on what was important to me and what I wanted to do with my life. I felt strongly that I was born to lead a life of service. I wanted only to lead a simple life and to serve as best I could. Perhaps one day I would even work in a Third World country.

So six months after my last bout, I "chose" the strongest treatment for endometriosis—the one most likely to be effective for the rest of my life (and with no continuing medication). I asked to have a hysterectomy.

Initially my doctor was opposed to it—but not on medical grounds. "What if some day you should decide to become a mother? What then?" *Decide* to become a mother? I have endometriosis—there's a good chance that I couldn't produce a baby even if I wanted to. And if I did decide to become a mother, I wanted to raise a child—not "produce" the baby.

"But what if someday you marry someone who wants to have his own biological children? It may not be important to you, but it may be very important to him." I was appalled at this question. We should take some hypothetical man's peculiarities into consideration over my very real pain and what's important to me? I calmly pointed out to the doctor that I would have told this man long before we were married that I could not have children. Even without this operation, I would still have to tell him of the very real possibility that I would not be able to conceive a child.

My doctor asked me to see a psychiatrist. If he thought I was all right, then my doctor would perform the operation. I was under a lot of stress at the time, as I was now in my first semester of graduate school. In order for the surgery to be covered by my medical insurance, I had to still be in school when I had it. I was so worried about what would happen if the answer was no.

**"I am free to serve now without the distraction of crippling pain."**

**"My pastor suggested we gather a small group of people to support me in the weeks prior to the service. What a special group it was! Not only did they give me unconditional love, they gave me practical support as well."**

I was very relieved that after only one visit, the psychiatrist declared me fit to make my own decision. My doctor reluctantly performed the surgery soon after my 22nd birthday—more than six years after the pain started.

This was five years ago, and I have never once regretted my decision, though people unwittingly try to get me to. People assume you can, and will, one day want to produce babies. They say things like, "Bearing children is the greatest joy imaginable!" There is a look of hesitation on my face as I wonder how best to respond to these well-intentioned people. The person is then quick to add, "You may not want children now, but one day you will." I know these people mean well, but sometimes I feel frustrated because someone might find these comments very cruel.

You know, I never thought I'd live to be 25—yet I'm 27 now. I am truly blessed. My life is simple, and I daily devote myself to God's work. I rely on the strength given to me and on that mysterious (and sometimes annoying) hope, when things look the most bleak. I am free to serve now without the distraction of crippling pain. What more could I possibly want? My greatest burden has been lifted from my shoulders and replaced with gratitude and utter joy. •

*UPDATE: The writer reports that since this article was written, she has married and she and her husband now have two foster children. She says, "I couldn't be happier."*

## Single and Pregnant

I was 22 and single, with a brand new job in a Mennonite church, when I finally dragged myself to a doctor to have him tell me I was six months pregnant. Two thousand miles from my family and still feeling somewhat new in the area, I was devastated. Never have I felt so alone. My situation looked hopeless. I was two weeks into a new job as a church secretary. Mennonites traditionally have not dealt kindly with these situations, and since I had broken ties with the father of my baby and his friends, I felt as if I had nowhere to turn.

The only realistic option for support appeared to be my church, but I wasn't sure I could handle the rejection that would inevitably come from them. Knowing that I needed to tell my pastor about my pregnancy, I asked God to present a perfect opportunity to do so. I knew I didn't have the courage to go looking for one. Within a few days that "perfect opportunity" came. Though my courage nearly failed me, I told my pastor the "bad news." Much to my amazement, he was completely calm and understanding through the entire conversation. Never have I felt such love and compassion. There was no condemnation or rebuke. Instead, he simply asked, "Where do we go from here? What would you like to do next?"

His primary concern was that I had confessed my sin to God and had peace of heart. I could say YES to that! After talking some more, I decided to share this with the congregation at an upcoming communion service. My pastor suggested we gather a small group of people to support me in the weeks prior to the service. What a special group it was! Not only did they give me unconditional love, they gave me practical support as well.

As the communion service approached, I began to lose my courage. Although our communion services were generally small and intimate, I didn't see how I could possibly stand in front of a hundred or more people and tell them their church secretary was pregnant.

That night the pastor preached a beautiful sermon on forgiveness. He talked about the woman caught in adultery and how Jesus forgave her and told her to go and sin no more. He set a perfect stage for me. An amazing calm came over me as I walked up front and stood beside my pastor. I was able to tell everyone what had happened and that I was sorry for it, but .



"Suddenly I knew what the 'church' really meant. It wasn't merely a nice theological concept; it was the love of Christ in action."

"My plea to pastors and congregations is to be sensitive to the wounded among us. We have the power to make or break those wounded. How often we abuse that power and make people suffer when they have already suffered enough. I cannot emphasize enough the forgiveness of God that reaches to everyone, everywhere."



there was a baby on the way as a result. I panicked when the pastor then asked anyone who wanted to, to come gather around me and pray. I hadn't been let down by my pastor, but to expect the support of an entire congregation was unrealistic. I thought only a few people would be supportive. I couldn't have been more wrong. Nearly every seat was empty, and the aisles were packed around me. The tears flowed everywhere—especially from me. They prayed for my good health and asked God to bless the baby and make it healthy.

Suddenly I knew what the "church" really meant. It wasn't merely a nice theological concept; it was the love of Christ in action. Many, many people told me later how much they respected me for my openness and strength. An elder in our church shared that he also needed to clear up some things and my courage to step out had encouraged him to do the same. To tell a pregnant, single woman that you respect her has to be the ultimate compliment! God only knew how little I thought of myself prior to that moment.

In the next couple of months, as I waited for the birth of my child, I was blessed in practical ways by my church family. One family offered me a room in their home at no cost. Another woman went to childbirth classes with me. So many people rallied around me and gave of themselves.

One week before Christmas my precious daughter, Rachel, was born. Immediately she became "church property." Everyone had invested a little of themselves in that child. When we arrived at the Christmas Eve service a tiny gasp of

delight swept over the church. That sound warmed my heart because I knew it meant we were loved. Again we were showered with gifts and blessings. Until Rachel was six weeks old I did not spend one cent on her. Her needs had been met—all the way from formula to a car seat.

The love and support we received during the "crisis" period has continued over the years. Several years ago I decided to return to school full-time and moved back to my home community. While it was difficult to leave my church family, I now realize that their support enabled me to heal and move on in positive directions.

Today my daughter is an outgoing and bubbly five-year-old. I shed a few tears on her first day of kindergarten this fall, realizing it was an end of an era. But it was also the beginning of a new one. This summer I married a wonderful man. Sometimes people ask Rachel about her "real" father. While she has a biological father, my husband is truly her *real* father. No one could fill that role more perfectly than he does.

Looking back, I realize how very much I would have missed had I not reached out to my church family. My blood family was also very loving and supportive, but being 2,000 miles away put limits on that support. I am aware that few stories like mine have happy endings. My plea to pastors and congregations is to be sensitive to the wounded among us. We have the power to make or break those wounded. How often we abuse that power and make people suffer when they have already suffered enough. I cannot emphasize enough the forgiveness of God that reaches to everyone, everywhere. •

**"The consequences of people knowing I was pregnant without wanting to get married seemed more drastic than getting an abortion and getting it over with."**

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## Abortion

I would like to first share a few notes from my background. I feel this has had a lot to do with the choices and decisions I've made, whether good or bad. I came from a General Conference Mennonite church. Most of what I remember from growing up in the church was adhering to rules and regulations the church had set for its members. I went along with almost everything and at the age of 14 accepted Christ as my personal Savior during a Christian Growth service at a Mennonite high school. I was sent to this high school as my parents thought I was straying from the church's beliefs.

Home life was always frightening. I was scared of my dad because he was a highly authoritative figure. Verbal abuse within the family was prevalent, and I soon began to feel I was the worst person in the world. At times I entertained thoughts of suicide. I would literally hide from Dad, as I was suspicious of his thought life and the amount of physical contact he had with my sisters.

Family devotions were probably the worst experiences at home because there Dad had complete control over the family. The horse whip that hung on the wall (purposely so everyone who came over could see how bad we were) was always a warning that I'd better adhere to the rules and regulations. I was compared to the preacher's kid. I was told my graduation dress was too pretty for me. I was told women don't belong in college. I never remember being hugged or told that I was loved. Mom was a submissive wife and I cannot remember her standing up for her own beliefs. She was passive and did not seem to have a mind of her own.

During the eighth grade, while in public school, I started going with a guy about nine years older than me. He used me, but was someone who held me. I went to his place during school, so my parents never knew. This was my first sexual experience, and I was scared. I knew I could get pregnant, but didn't. I finally broke up with him and vowed I would never do it again. I knew sex before marriage was wrong, but my immediate need for someone to love me was stronger. That was all that mattered.

After graduation from high school, I went into Mennonite Disaster Service. Then I worked close to home for about three years. At that time I decided I had enough of the church I was attending. I needed to feel cared for and that's the kind

of church I looked for. I found a church where I felt at home and soon became a member.

A woman at that church encouraged me in a lot of ways. Through her encouragement, I decided to go to college, although I had no support from my parents. I enrolled in a Mennonite college. I felt so alone. I always felt different from everyone else. My self-esteem was so low and I was very depressed. I was sick of listening to preachers and was down on others who attended Bible study. Despite this I worked hard to get involved in organizations and committees and wanted people to notice me. Nobody noticed the real feelings I had inside.

It was in my freshman year that the devastation hit. I met a very caring guy. He listened to my problems and was there whenever I needed him. I dated him on and off, always feeling confused as to what I really wanted. I was working during school to try to pay my way. I was a residence assistant and was involved in student council. All of this put much pressure on me. At the same time I was continuing to be motivated from my own bitterness toward my parents and my need for acceptance because I felt inadequate.

During Easter break, I spent some time with my boyfriend. He was doing his field placement and had his own apartment. I found myself spending more time going back and forth to his apartment, than the amount of time spent with him. I soon found myself wanting to stay evenings. I did, and was scared again by the possibility of being pregnant. I waited, and soon started feeling sick. I discussed this with my boyfriend. The only option he saw was abortion.

We certainly were not ready to get married. I had a lot of reservations about him—not really trusting him. I felt my emotional world crashing. This felt like the ultimate sin, yet I didn't know anyone I could go to for help. The consequences of people knowing I was pregnant without wanting to get married seemed more drastic than getting an abortion and getting it over with. Besides, nobody would know. I also felt I could not bring a child into the world, give it up for adoption and always know someone out there was a part of me. That seemed worse than abortion. I refused to think about what it would mean to raise a child of my own. Abortion was simpler than all that.

**"I wish in the middle of my emotional pain someone could have looked past all the outward appearances of conformity and idealism and seen what was happening within our family."**



I went to a clinic. Other girls were there. I was scared and couldn't believe I was there. At this time everything was a daze. I just went through the motions, in some ways in a state of shock. After it was over, it wasn't as bad as I thought.

It wasn't long after that I got pregnant again. I had been given birth control pills, but I didn't believe in taking them. In some ways I thought I would pay for my actions in the worst way possible. Knowing sex before marriage was wrong, taking the pill would not make it right. In fact, that seemed worse. I went through the same process.

By that time I was an emotional wreck. One night I stayed awake all night, crying and asking God to forgive me. I felt cleansed, but it wasn't until someone found out about it that I could really talk things out. I was so glad I didn't have to keep it a secret anymore. That year I broke up with my boyfriend and told myself I deserved better than him. I had resisted several times, and realized that men also have a responsibility. I was not the only cause for what was happening.

At this point I do not regret what I have done. At the time I had to work a lot of things out. I believe God has forgiven me, and now I need to go on with life. My emotional life at the time was distorted. I saw through a glass darkly. I was depressed and felt like a worthless being in a cruel world. Every day was a struggle for survival. My relationships with others were superficial. I couldn't relate to others' feelings of happiness and joy. Every moment of the day seemed like a living hell. I do understand that despite my background, despite my feelings, I am responsible for my actions and direction in life.

After graduation from college, I thought I would feel better about myself. But my feelings didn't change. This past year I started therapy to deal with my own self-concept and unresolved issues. I wish I had done this a long time ago. I have grown and built confidence in myself. I feel changed. My view of the world, God, and relationships has changed. I continue to struggle with the true purpose of church and am trying to form my beliefs into my life.

I am now a social worker in a mental health center. I counsel many women with many different problems. God has given me this gift, and I plan to continue to use it for Him. I have the ability to empathize with others in a true way and personally understand the hurts people are dealing with.

I sometimes wonder where the church is when its own people are hurting. We evade the issues. We are scared of putting the problems on the table because we don't understand how to deal with intense feelings. We tell people to get right with God, to straighten up, to fit into the mold. Only then can we accept them.

The church knows how to deal with death, sickness and sorrow. But what about teenagers who are having emotional problems? What about problems at home? I believe Christianity can be a mask and an escape. We can look beyond our problems to the heavenly and brainwash ourselves to believe that everything is okay. Sometimes we fool ourselves.

I wish in the middle of my emotional pain someone could have looked past all the outward appearances of conformity and idealism and seen what was happening within our family. We were a Christian, dysfunctional family in the highest manner that I know. Now in my adulthood I must work through the pain and hurt I've finally been allowed to express with a therapist. I would love to share my emotional healing with others within the church, but continue to be frightened by many Christian people's inability to understand that people, even Christians, experience this type of pain. Where is the helping church?

I have much joy in knowing that in many ways I've been able to put the past aside and look forward to developing healthy relationships and to living a totally new life!•

**"Childlessness pushes a woman to think about her personal identity and goals..."**



## A Childless Couple

I've been married for five years. My husband, being quadriplegic, is sterile. We discovered this after our first year of marriage and were not too affected by the news because we had serious plans to go to seminary (which we are now doing). We did not really think about children for a few years, but started talking about it during our last semester.

I had (and still have) questions about the meaning of motherhood. Childlessness pushes a woman to think about her personal identity and goals in life, and I find myself being critical of young women who start a family the first or second year of marriage. It can become a way to be recognized as a "successful" wife without stretching one's own potential. It keeps one busy for the next 20 years and gives a sense of security and stability.

One main reason I don't feel desperate about being childless is the way I was raised. My non-Christian parents never emphasized being married or having children to be happy, although they modeled it through their lives. Also, I think

education makes a difference. It creates awareness of the many possibilities open to you.

I do think the church is not well equipped to handle childless couples. (It is the same thing with singles!) One reason may be because the church is family-oriented. The other reason may be that childlessness often causes a breaking of the traditional male/female role. I would not say the church was hurtful to our experience, but I do wish people would quit thinking that if you cannot have kids of your own, you "should" automatically try to adopt. It is like saying that there is no happiness or true fulfillment as a couple outside parenthood.

Following is a paper I wrote on this topic in my last semester. It summarizes my personal reflections on childlessness.

### **"An Integrative Approach to Understand the Childless Couple"**

In our society, functional roles are assigned according to sex identity and are related to parenting functions, especially for the woman. Being a wife and mother gives one identity and security. James Henslin wrote in *Marriage and Family in a Changing Society* that maternity is the way to secure the status of a woman. "There is considerable pressure upon the growing girl and young woman to consider maternity necessary for a woman's fulfillment as an individual and to secure her status as an adult." If she chooses a road different from maternity, or simply cannot engage in it, the way towards social acceptance and security will be more difficult, especially in the church setting. By not being different, one hopes one will feel accepted and will easily find her way in the crowd.

Among the various social devices for impelling women to bear and rear children we find education, public opinion, beliefs and even the arts. Television's romance is another social device. "The birth rate in daytime TV seems to rival that of Latin America," wrote Peck and Senderowitz in *Pronatalism: The Myth of Mom and Apple Pie*. Without being aware of it, we are bombarded with a pronatalist philosophy and cannot make objective choices regarding parenting. They continue, "In a society where there are general, subtle and specific pressures to be like everyone else on the block ... there are many communities and groups that make a childless couple feel uncomfortable, if not peculiar, just as a single person is made to feel slightly unacceptable in a world full of married couples. The discomfort forces people to conform by having babies (or marriages) they don't really want."

**"The Christian community should be a place where people experience reconciled relationships and where it is understood that everyone does have a precious contribution to the whole body, whether parent or not."**

In Christian circles marriage is still understood as a divine reproductive institution. For the Hebrew in ancient times the ability to procreate was defined as a blessing and infertility as a curse. Today's Christians show tendencies to think in those terms, and it makes it even more difficult for the childless couple. "Have we ceased viewing our childless state as a curse and begun to open up to its blessings? Are we hoarding or investing the gift of time which accompanies the childfree life?" (Love, 1984, p.177)

The childless couple is an asset to the church because it can offer its time and gifts without restriction. Anthony Campolo mentioned that the columns of the early church were singles and that now in our society we have turned things around. We worship the "two kids family" and just hope for the singles to get married. By our behavior we imply that the single person is not a full person and the childless couple is not a complete couple.

Churches give a great deal of attention to instructing parents in the art of raising children. Of the many tasks of adult development, this one gets more attention from the church than any other. Are we sure that we are not leaving anyone out? Christian education programs could be arranged so that everybody feels accepted in the church. The idea here is not to become specialists in every area where there are needs but rather to make sure that no one is left out because of a difference. By undergoing slight adjustments, such a congregation can make a whole segment of society feel more at home in the church setting. The Christian community should be a place where people experience reconciled relationships and where it is understood that everyone does have a precious contribution to the whole body, whether parent or not.

Childlessness presents a particular problem for the Christian community because there is a breakdown of roles. What happens when a wife is not a mother, a husband not a father? Some elements of the women's movement have argued that bearing children is the great unequalizer. The wife becomes the homemaker and at church will get involved in ministries around children. The husband, on the other hand, becomes the breadwinner and spiritual leader.

Motherhood makes the male/female differentiation predominant in terms of sex roles if the primary caretaker is the mother. But as both partners of the childless couple take equal part in various social, academic and domestic activities, a male/female differentiation based on functional roles becomes nearly impossible. By applying pressure toward

natalism, the church indirectly emphasizes traditional roles unless creative alternatives are developed by the couple itself.

In her book, *Passages*, Gail Sheehy makes the point that values of people in their 20s are characterized by "shoulds and oughts." "The shoulds are defined by the family destiny, the press of the culture and/or the prejudices of our peers." One of those shoulds is "I should have children by now." Robert Gould proposes in *Transformation: Growth and Change in Adult Life*, that it is important for the individual at that stage to behave "as the architects of their own existence and to accept the full responsibility of it." Childbearing leads many women into stereotyped roles. Sheehy suggests four types of women: the nurturer who defers achievement, the achiever who defers nurturing, the late-baby superachievers, and the integrators. As Christians we can learn from these theories because they offer us some guidelines and a sense of continuity to life, but we also need to remember that they are descriptive and not prescriptive. There should always be place for individual creativity.

Because of those social and religious factors, all of us have stereotypical ideas about the childless couple. We see them as struggling people not blessed by God, or selfish individuals not mature enough to give their whole selves to the demands of family life. We may think they have more marriage problems than others or that they don't have any goals in life.

In the article "The Impact of Infertility on the Marital Relationship," (Sept. 1982, *Social Casework*), Constance Shapiro looked at the impact of infertility on couples and suggests that they go through the same stages of grief as developed by Kubler-Ross. The marital relationship is affected by efforts to come to terms with infertility: sexual identity, self-esteem, communication patterns, and future life choices. She emphasized that once the acceptance stage is reached, the couple is ready to look ahead to other life options. This information is helpful for the caring Christian.

In a comparison between the intentional parent and the intentionally childless couple, Harold Feldman found that the level of marital satisfaction for the two was similar but that the childless couple tended to have less traditional attitudes toward women and to interact more with each other than the parents did.

Christine Bachrach reported in an article, "Childlessness and Social Isolation Among the Elderly," (August 1980, *Journal of Marriage and the Family*) that childlessness has a particu-

larly powerful effect on the probability of isolation but this effect is strongly conditioned by the health and occupational class of the elderly.

We have markers throughout life that give us a sense of accomplishment. For a married couple the major markers are said to be the birth of a first child, parenting teenagers, the empty-nest syndrome and becoming grandparents. The church usually assists its members through most of these stages. We celebrate childbirth and offer help for the first weeks to the new parents, and we seek to support those who struggle with their teenage children, but what do we do with the childless couple? How can we create rituals for these brothers and sisters who need to know that they are supported, appreciated and growing?

Donald Capps, author of *Life Cycle Theory and Pastoral Care*, developed a life-cycle theory for the Christian community to celebrate and care for each other. In young adulthood, he mentions the "affiliative element" and points to the idea of friendship. The church as a community of believers should be a haven of friends, of people who listen, care, cry and laugh with each other as life unfolds. Jesus himself said, "Greater love has no one than this, that a person lay down his life for his friends." (John 15:13)

Wedding anniversaries can be mentioned to the congregation and a corsage offered to the couple. Pre-marital counseling classes can get back together every year after marriage to assess their married life. We need to be more spontaneous and creative.

The other element in adulthood is the generational element which Capps describes as a need to transmit to the other generation. The Roman Catholics have as part of their baptismal tradition, the choosing of a godfather and god-mother for the newborn. We can assign those who are childless and willing to do so to be that resource couple for children in the congregation. It is assumed that parents cannot fulfill all the emotional, spiritual and social needs of the child. This practice would also help fight individualism in the church. Rituals need to be created around the needs and personality of the community.

Childlessness, whether voluntary or not, is not a failure. It is a challenge for the couple, their families, and the whole congregation. We need to be more sensitive to the needs of the childless couple who is struggling and less judgmental toward those who choose not to become parents. It is with a spirit of compassion and care that we will grow as the body of Christ. •



## Sex Roles and Injustice in the Home

I grew up in a "good" Mennonite home. We had everything we needed and much that we wanted. My parents believed in those old-fashioned, traditional values, which discriminated and created injustice. For example: women belong in the home, men belong in the career world. Or: a woman is valued in life by her servanthood to her husband and to her children. Growing up I saw how those ideas created a narrow, fit-in-this-box world. I saw that males could be anything while women had limited choices. I could not fit into that mold, so I felt the pain people endure when they are restricted or confined by their society, yet follow their *own* being (rather than someone else's idea of who they should be).

Seeing this injustice around me, I began to feel angry. I became angry at my mother for teaching me domestic skills but expecting nothing from my brothers. I became angry with her for accepting her "lot in life"—serving my father, feeling of less worth than men, "Dad is the head"—instead of improving it. Just recently have I begun to accept my mother and the choices she made.

I became angry at men. My anger towards them runs deeper than my anger towards my mom. I still fight this anger. I feel men are the cause of the trouble and injustice in this world. I



**"This experience created not just anger, but empathy—empathy for sexually abused women and children and other powerless people abused by the powerful."**

feel this way, not only because of what I see happening in the world but also because of my experiences. In my home the males got what they wanted. In my home I was not worth as much as my brothers. They got privileges; I served. Also, my father was not an example of love. He provided for us, but I did not see much of him. That kind of love was distant and not very comforting as I grew up. Another reason for my anger is the actuality that one of my older brothers sexually molested me.

This experience created not just anger, but empathy—empathy for sexually abused women and children and other powerless people abused by the powerful (in my thinking it is men who are the powerful, therefore the abusers).

## **DES Daughter —Struggling with Infertility**

My husband and I have always known we wanted children, but we waited five years to start our family.

A couple of years after our marriage, my gynecologist told me we might have trouble having children because of the effects of a drug (DES) that my mother took 30 years ago when she was pregnant with me. "DES (diethylstilbestrol) is a synthetic female hormone (estrogen) that was used to prevent miscarriages during the 1940s-1970s. Between 60-90 percent of daughters born to women who took DES during their pregnancies have been found to have changes in their vagina or cervix due to their DES exposure. In some DES daughters, the vagina and cervix as well as uterus show structural changes," explains Joyce Bichler in her book, *DES Daughter*. Unfortunately I have the maximum effects of the drug. Approximately one in 1000 DES daughters develops cancer. As a result, I have to see my gynecologist every six months for special check-ups. It is a known fact that DES can cause problems with conception and/or with carrying a pregnancy to term.

Growing up in the Mennonite church has not helped my confidence or self-worth (I worked at that on my own), or helped me become forgiving or more positive to men. I feel the church is steps behind society in correcting injustice and oppression. I try to fight this sin I see within the church, but the resistance makes it hard to keep fighting. Sometimes I feel like quitting the Mennonite church, but I feel I must keep trying. I must help people to see the real Jesus—the man who came to free the enslaved, the *man* who was a servant and who told Mary that she was correct to sit at his feet and listen (not to help Martha with housework).•

My gynecologist told us we should try to become pregnant for a year and if nothing happened, then we would begin tests. I began to lose hope after six months. Finally a year had gone by and I was not pregnant. So we began those dreaded fertility tests, many of which were painful and humiliating.

After several months of tests and not finding anything wrong, I asked my gynecologist to refer us to a fertility specialist. The specialist did several tests (which also involved testing my husband) and the next thing I knew I was scheduled for surgery. I had an exploratory laparoscopy done and the specialist was able to laser out quite a bit of endometriosis. Endometriosis is a progressive disease and so its effects, combined with those of DES, had made us unable to achieve conception.

Now I have told you all the facts, but left out the emotional side. Let me say that the last three years have been the most difficult of our eight years of marriage.

There is no pain like the pain of infertility. It is devastating. My husband and I wanted children very much, and seeing all our friends have children only made matters worse. We could

**"The emotional roller coaster worsened as the months and years passed. No one can know what this emotional roller coaster is like unless you have personally experienced infertility."**

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not go anywhere without being reminded of our childlessness. Church was often the worst place because it represented families. We found ourselves withdrawing from our friends and support group. It was just too painful.

The feelings of inferiority that I have always dealt with came to the forefront. I felt inferior as a woman. My husband could father children (we knew that from the tests), but I could not bear him children. My body was failing me and I became so depressed. The emotional roller coaster worsened as the months and years passed. No one can know what this emotional roller coaster is like unless you have personally experienced infertility. Every month my husband and I would get our hopes up—maybe this time it would happen. I would even calculate when the baby would be due if we were to conceive that month. And every month we would be devastated when my period came. I knew it bothered my husband just as much as it did me, but often he didn't show it. I guess he felt he needed to be strong.

Added to our pain were the thoughtless and inconsiderate comments we began hearing more and more as the years passed and we were still childless. Comments like, "Isn't it about your turn?" or, "Look how much fun you're missing!" made us bite our tongues, blink back tears and swallow the lump in our throats. Finally we started to reply, "We would love to have children but are unable to have our own," so that people would be aware of our situation and would not continue to make comments.

Last year, after two years of trying to conceive unsuccessfully, we finally decided to go to a marriage and family counselor who also arranges private adoptions. On our first visit, we just talked about our feelings and the stress infertility was bringing to our lives and marriage. After listening, he recommended that we begin the adoption process because it would be something positive to work toward. It was harder for me than for my husband. I still was having trouble accepting the fact that I could not have children.

But the Lord works in miraculous ways. When we began the adoption process, our social worker told us we could be 65 before he found a baby for us, meaning that he did not have anything to offer us at that time. Currently there is not an abundance of babies to be adopted because of abortions and because many single women now keep their babies.

We finished our home study in September. While that was an important part of the adoption process, it was rather frustrat-



ing because we had to prove our worth as potentially responsible parents. In contrast, if you have your own children, nobody checks to make sure that you will be capable of meeting the demands of parenthood.

The end of October we went to our fertility specialist and told him we were quitting all medical means of trying to get pregnant. It was difficult to do, yet we knew it was the right decision. The very next morning as I was getting ready for work, our social worker called and said he had a pregnant woman coming into his office that day, and wondered if he could give our names as prospective parents. I said, "Sure!" He told us not to get excited, that it was a long shot. We did get excited, though; it was hard not to start dreaming.

This particular social worker lets the birth-mother choose the parents of her child. He gave this woman four couples to choose from, and in December we got a call saying we had been chosen to be the adoptive parents of this woman's child. We were elated!

However, we were scared to get too excited for fear she would change her mind and decide to keep the baby, which is a real possibility for private adoptions. We shared the news with our families at Christmas but decided not to tell anyone else at that point, as had been recommended by the social worker, in case it all fell through. We at least had the prayers and support of our families to see us through the waiting period.

The baby was due in mid-March. From March 1 on every time the phone rang, we wondered if this would be "the call." We waited until March 26 to receive that wonderful call telling us we were parents. We now have a beautiful baby girl, received at three days old. She is our pride and joy, and we love her dearly. She has brought so much joy into our lives, for which we praise God.

Let me say that the wait was extremely taxing. We had the same fears everyone else has when waiting for their child to be born—will it be normal and healthy? But on top of that we had the anxiety of not knowing whether the birth-mother would change her mind, or if indeed this child would be ours. We did not know if the phone call that came would be devastating or if it would put us on top of the world. Fortunately for us, the news was good, and we feel wonderfully blessed. Our social worker informed us later that this was one of the most unusual adoptions he has ever done. She definitely is a miracle!

Do we ever wish we could have our own? I would not be honest if I didn't say yes. My husband and I still wonder what it would be like to hear the heartbeat and feel movement. But we can still be parents to a child, regardless of whether she is biologically ours.

Adoption is a gift in itself. Once you reach the point of acceptance, it becomes a beautiful thing. For us it was a wonderful experience, and we will definitely go through it again for a second child some day. •

*UPDATE: This article was written about 4 years ago. The writer reports, "In January 1991, after a normal pregnancy, labor and delivery, we became parents of a beautiful bouncing boy. He is the answer to our daughter's and our prayers for an additional gift of life that is ours to treasure, nurture and love for our life time."*

## Miscarriage

My story begins in our family physician's office one January. In a concerned and kindly voice my doctor told me I was pregnant and probably in the process of miscarrying my baby. Quite uncharacteristically I burst into tears. That afternoon was just the beginning of a long, emotional and difficult year. The tears that soaked into my doctor's gently offered hanky were only the first of many tears I was to shed over the next months.

A month earlier, my period had not arrived on schedule. I thought for awhile that I might possibly be pregnant. I had stopped taking the pill in the summer. Our son Joel was five and my husband and I had decided we would like to have another child.

When my period began a couple weeks later, I was unconcerned. It must just have been a bit delayed. I am a primary school teacher and Christmas is a tense time for me with concerts, lively children, gift buying and preparing for our traditional holiday trip to visit my husband's parents who live over a thousand miles away. I rationalized that all the stress had thrown my body's cycle out of kilter.

When after three weeks my period hadn't stopped, I became concerned and made an appointment to see my family doctor. That was when he informed me of the pregnancy and possible miscarriage.

That same evening I was admitted to the hospital. The doctor threw a lot of possibilities at my husband and me in the next few hours. The baby might be damaged and this was nature's way of handling things. If all went well, I would spontaneously abort the child. If the bleeding stopped, ultrasound and amniocentesis would help determine if the baby was still healthy. If it was not, my husband and I would have to consider seriously the possibility of an abortion.

I spent a sleepless night. I always had strong feelings about abortion. I subscribed to free choice for women, but personally believed, and often said, that I could never have an abortion myself. This was in keeping with my absolute dedication to the peace teaching of the Mennonite church. If I believed that military service and capital punishment were wrong, then so was abortion. During that night, however, my former easily assumed convictions faded in the face of

**"I thought I would be deliriously happy when I became pregnant again a few months later. Instead, I was tense, worried and nervous."**

reality. Would I really have the courage to continue with a pregnancy knowing my child might be severely handicapped?

My husband and I never had to make that agonizing decision. Further tests determined our baby had died. When after several days I failed to abort the fetus spontaneously, a D and C was performed.

My pastor visited me while I was in the hospital. I started to cry when I told him about losing my baby. He put his hand on my arm and said gently, "We're with you." He didn't say anything else. I don't think he knew what to say. But I was glad. I wasn't ready then for any religious platitudes or assurances that this was God's will. What he did was just right.

I don't know if was related to my experience, but shortly afterwards our pastor asked that during the upcoming deacon elections the congregation seriously consider calling a woman to the position of deacon. There were counseling and visiting situations where he felt a woman could empathize more readily with those in need of counsel and care.

I returned to my school classroom as soon as I could. My doctor reassured me that since I had already had one normal healthy child, there was every possibility that I would be able to carry my next pregnancy to full term. He also emphasized that nothing I had done had caused the miscarriage and I need take no special precautions.

I was ready to put the whole experience behind me and try to look on it in a positive light. I had gained new sympathy for women who have to choose whether or not to have abortions. I had gained new empathy for other women who suffered miscarriage. My husband and I had reaffirmed our faith and love through a trying time. I was prepared to get on with my life.

This proved to be much more difficult than I could ever have possibly imagined. Not usually very emotional, I was suddenly unable to control an impulse to burst into tears over any little thing.

Besides my job as a grade two teacher, I was also an assistant principal and in charge of professional development for the teachers in my school division. Used to handling complaints from teachers and parents with calmness, reason and efficiency, I now fought back tears at the slightest criticism or minor crisis. I was frustrated. I seemed to be proving that



female stereotypes were right. Women cannot handle emotional stress.

One of the biggest mistakes I made during this time was not explaining to my five-year-old son exactly what was happening. He knew something was wrong, but we thought him too young to be given all the details.

One evening shortly after the miscarriage I burst into tears at the supper table. After a few minutes I felt a small warm hand on my leg. Nathan crawled onto my lap, wrapped his arms around my neck and said in a quiet voice, "You know Mommy, when you went to the hospital, I thought maybe you were going there to get me a brother." Although he had been told nothing, he intuitively figured out more or less what had happened. I explained what a miscarriage was and answered his questions. We both felt a lot better.

I thought I would be deliriously happy when I became pregnant again a few months later. Instead, I was tense, worried and nervous. Would I lose this baby too? Every night

**"I am convinced that we do not take the common occurrence of miscarriage seriously enough. Until it happened to me, I had no way of knowing the grief, anxiety and emotional upheaval that the loss of a pregnancy can trigger."**

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when I went to bed I was sure I would wake up in the morning and the telltale blood stains would be there. I even began to have nightmares. It was like walking a tightrope day after day. After twelve weeks of pregnancy I miscarried again.

Several months later I became pregnant again and the same anxiety set in. I counted each day, hour by hour. Time dragged by. In spite of my doctor's reassurances, I was convinced the miscarriages were my fault. Was it because I hadn't been eating properly? Was it because I had carried my sleeping son out to the car when I picked him up at my mother's? Was it because I pushed our car out of a snow bank when it got stuck? Was it because I was working too hard? Maybe I should quit my job. But my job was what helped keep me sane and busy during the last difficult months. How could I quit? After only eight weeks, I miscarried again.

After my third lost pregnancy, my faith in the medical profession began to waver. My doctor had simply no idea why I was unable to stay pregnant. He sent me to a city specialist near our rural community. The specialist was kind and sympathetic, but relatively unconcerned. Yes, he could do a battery of tests on me and my husband. In 10 percent of cases this helped to determine why the miscarriages were occurring. In 1 percent of those 10 percent of cases he could do something to correct whatever was causing the fetus to abort spontaneously. His statistics were not too hope inspiring. His best advice was to go home and try to get pregnant again. When I confided that I didn't know if I could take the emotional trauma of another lost pregnancy, he told me cheerfully of a patient who had only managed to carry a pregnancy to term after seven miscarriages. He implied that I should hardly be concerned after only three.

We decided to try one more time. However, we began to consider seriously the possibility that we would never be able to have another child. We submitted our names to the Children's Aid Society for adoption.

It wasn't long until I became pregnant again. This time I was very sick, nauseous 24 hours a day. I had not been ill with the other three pregnancies so I welcomed the nausea as a positive sign.

When I finally made it past the three month milestone, I was incredulous. It had finally happened! Tests proved that a healthy fetus was developing. When I saw that strong heartbeat on the ultrasound screen, I laughed out loud.

I still found it impossible to believe, however, that our good fortune could be completely true. Throughout my pregnancy I kept warning myself not to get too excited—something could still happen. My miscarriages had given me a somewhat fatalistic attitude. I recall thinking as I put the finishing touches on the baby's nursery, "Now don't get too carried away. You might be doing this for nothing. Something could still happen."

When my doctor exclaimed during the delivery, "The cord is wrapped around his neck," I thought resignedly, "I knew it." I didn't really believe I had a healthy baby until the nurses laid the howling baby on my chest.

Our new son has brought unbelievable joy to our family. Perhaps he is loved and appreciated even more because of the difficulties we went through.

I still look on our year of recurring miscarriages as a learning experience. It was a time of questioning my faith in God. I prayed a lot that year. They were selfish, single-minded prayers. It was hard to understand why this was happening. Was there some master plan at work? Was I not meant to have more children? Was God trying to tell me something? My older son prayed each night with a simple childlike faith for a healthy brother or sister. I was never as convinced as he was that God would answer our prayers.

That year of miscarriages was a time of learning to know my husband better. In a period of crisis you say things that you might not have had the courage to say at other times. Although it was one of the most difficult years of our marriage, it drew us closer together and strengthened our commitment to one another.

One thing that really amazed me was how many women offered me words of understanding and shared their own miscarriage experiences with me. This was particularly true of women in my church and extended family, many of whom I had never known had miscarriages.

I am convinced that we do not take the common occurrence of miscarriage seriously enough. Until it happened to me, I had no way of knowing the grief, anxiety and emotional upheaval that the loss of a pregnancy can trigger. In the future I know I will be a lot more understanding when I hear a couple has experienced a miscarriage. I hope telling my story can inspire other people to be more sympathetic and understanding too. •

**"Susan and understanding friends pulled us through. How could we feel depressed and angry when she was her happy, affectionate self, oblivious to all worries?"**

## A Child With a Handicap

My husband James and I decided to apply for adoption when we found we would probably be unable to have children of our own. I had always said I didn't want to adopt — especially a native child — but when we had to decide what kind of baby we wanted, we decided to accept a native baby. It took months to reach this decision. We knew we would have a hard time convincing our families that our decision was the "right" one, so we had to be sure ourselves. James' family reacted as expected. They questioned us, but could hardly condemn us because he has an adopted native brother. My family needed to get used to the adoption idea before they tackled the native one. After much discussion, the idea was accepted by all. We felt we needed their blessing because we wanted grandparents, aunts and uncles to be an important part of our child's life. Therefore, they needed to accept this child.

It is hard to remember all the thoughts and anxieties we experienced while waiting for Susan. We almost had one baby placed with us, but the birth mom decided to keep him. We grieved for this baby we never knew. It was as if someone had died. Then in May we were called. We had 45 minutes to adjust to being parents to a baby girl. We were cautious, though, about getting excited. What if this birth mom changed her mind too?

It was hard not to be excited when we saw her—long dark hair, blue eyes—and she was ours! We weren't alone in these events. Church friends encouraged us when the waiting was hard and rejoiced with us when Susan finally arrived.

The first four months went by uneventfully. Susan was a good baby, eating and sleeping lots, but we started to notice that she wasn't doing what the other four-month-olds were doing. By five months we were really concerned, so we were referred to a pediatrician who informed me that there was nothing wrong with Susan, and I should lower my standards for her, because not all kids progressed at the same rate. I wasn't satisfied. At eight months, a doctor friend listened to my story and asked if she could refer Susan to another pediatrician. Something was wrong but she didn't know what.

Susan was diagnosed with cerebral palsy (C.P.) when she was nine months old. We were shocked. C.P.? What is it? Our first reaction was anger at the doctors for not knowing sooner. (In retrospect, our family physician should have

noticed something at her three-week check-up). Then came the grief, first for ourselves, then for Susan. How would this affect our futures? We had had high hopes for her; now we were hoping she'd learn to walk and talk. A brain scan showed a large portion of the front of her brain was damaged, making the possibility of a mental handicap very real. We thought we would never smile again.

Susan and understanding friends pulled us through. How could we feel depressed and angry when she was her happy, affectionate self, oblivious to all worries? Friends offered a



listening ear to all our questions for the present and future. They had no answers, and we didn't expect them to. One thing in our favor was that we didn't have to deal with guilt about what might have gone wrong during pregnancy.

In one sense we were relieved that we finally knew what was wrong. Susan was fortunate to be able to start therapy immediately after the diagnosis. We felt good that we could now help her develop skills that "normal" children learn on their own. We realized how much we take for granted. How can you scratch your head if you can't get your arm up high enough?

Denial came about a year later. I remember getting very angry with Susan because she "couldn't do anything." "Be normal, be normal, be normal!" was all I could think. Why



her? Why us? I failed to see all the accomplishments. I saw only what she couldn't do.

Our most significant support came from church friends. They seemed most sensitive to our desire that Susan be treated as "normally" as possible, acknowledging her limitations and helping where necessary but not doing everything for her. They also tried to educate their children about why Susan couldn't walk or do many things without making her seem "odd." We appreciated that. Having your child accepted by others is very important.

We are now in the process of adopting a child through private adoption. Glen is six months old. We got him when he was four days old. Our perception of child development has been altered drastically in the last couple of months. Glen can do things already that Susan still cannot do (she's almost four). We have to be careful not to compare her too often. It gets discouraging to see Glen move so effortlessly without being taught, and then watch Susan struggle. I think we will have a frustrated little girl when Glen learns to walk.

Prospects for Susan look good. I expect she will attend the neighborhood school. She is learning to ride a horse and is doing well. Her speech is improving. She is pleasant to be around. She participates enthusiastically in all activities. She's very sociable. Her only handicap is a physical one.

We hope she will be able to live on her own when the time comes, but that worry is in the back of our minds. It seems so far in the future, but time has a way of slipping by. We are already stressing independence, knowing it takes longer for her to learn to do things. Doing everything for her now will not help her in the future.

Adopting a child, after coming to terms with not being able to have our own, took a lot of psychological struggling. We repeated this "coming to terms" when a handicap was identified. We can honestly say, however, that once these situations were accepted, we opened ourselves to a whole new set of experiences. We learned far more about early childhood development, and met new friends through the C.P. Association and Susan's therapy program. It has been good for Susan's playmates in our neighborhood and church to learn about being handicapped and to know someone who isn't "normal." This certainly has given these children a better understanding of others in wheelchairs. Susan has truly been accepted within our church as a special child and she has established her own place. It is no longer unusual to see one of the angels in the Christmas play arrive in a wheelchair. •

## Born Giving Birth

It's here! The Women's "creative arts project" initiated by MCC Women's Concerns some years back, and supported by many readers of *Women's Concerns Report*, is off the press.

*Born Giving Birth: Creative Expressions of Mennonite Women* was edited by Mary H. Shertz and Phyllis Martens. Containing the work of 40 Mennonite artists, it features poems and visual images that explore topics such as childhood, sexuality, nurturing, nature, the church and aging.

It is available from Faith and Life Press for \$19.95 (U.S.) and \$23.95 (Canadian). To order, contact Faith and Life Press, Box 347, Newton, KS 67114; or Faith and Life Press Canada, 600 Shaftesbury Blvd., Winnipeg, MB R3P 0M4. Or call Faith and Life's toll free OrderLine: 1-800-743-2484.



#### Women in Ministry

- **Carol Swartzendruber** is new campus pastor at Hesston (Kan.) College.
- **Arlyn Epp and Judith Friesen** are assistant pastors at Vineland (Ont.) Mennonite Church.
- **Jane H. Peifer** was installed as a member of the pastoral team at Community Mennonite Church, Harrisonburg, Va. She will oversee Christian education, youth ministries and outreach.
- **Heidi Regier Kreider** is new pastor of Emmanuel Mennonite Church in Gainesville, Fla.

## Letters

I read with much interest the July-August *Report* on Literacy. Melanie Zuercher's article "Sharing Stories and Educating for Social Change" was relevant to my recent work in nutrition education with young women in an urban environment.

Due to the dearth of appropriate nutrition/health education materials (in literacy level and cultural appropriateness) for our target population in Philadelphia, we developed our own materials. A team of health educators, nutritionists and literacy experts in the Philadelphia Dept. of Public Health developed these materials with the patients who would use them. It truly is a long, tedious but rewarding process which took us over two years. Through the process we "health professionals" learned a lot about this important issue.

The materials developed have received some national recognition, primarily because not enough has been done in the area of health and literacy. Those of you working on health issues with young pregnant women with lower level reading skills may wish to consider these resources. "Healthy Foods-Healthy Baby" is a package of nutrition education materials developed and pretested with young pregnant women. Limited free copies are available from: Philadelphia Dept. of Public Health, Maternal and Infant Health, 500 S. Broad St., Philadelphia, PA 19146.

—Kelli Burkholder King, Goshen, Ind.

- The Literacy issue of *Report* struck a chord with me. I have not worked with persons who cannot read in any language, but I have had considerable experience with persons, including myself, who are rendered practically illiterate by a change of country, language and culture. My family and I have lived in Belgium for five years. I have studied the French language and used it to some degree since we arrived. By now, though I know I still have a ways to go, I feel very comfortable with understanding and speaking. So it came as a shock to me to have a co-worker, whom I know very well, come to me after having read an extensive report that I had written in English about our work and say, "But Betsy, I never knew you could be so articulate! This is great!" She's been, I'm sure subconsciously, judging my overall intelligence and education level by my primary school level usage of French.



This experience made me think of the Ethiopian, Salvadoran, Vietnamese and other friends who came to the U.S. as refugees. It was easy to help fill their physical needs. It was easy to treat them like children who needed instruction every step of the way. And they did need lots of help in adjusting to a new culture, different weather, a new language. What I regret now, looking back, is my lack of deep-down respect for them as equally intelligent and multi-experienced adult persons. I wish I had taken the time to seriously ask their opinions, to listen to what they were experiencing—to listen hard through the barrier of their limited English to the whole adult person on the other side.

Thanks for all your good work on behalf of all of us Mennonite women with concerns.

—Betsy Headrick McCrae, Brussels, Belgium

- **Joy and Walter Sawatsky** are new pastors of Homestead (Fla.) Mennonite Church.
- **Diane Zaerr** was licensed and installed as co-pastor of First Mennonite Church, Iowa City, Iowa, on Sept. 8.
- **Anne Stuckey and Dale Stoltzfus** are new staff people for the Mennonite Church leadership ministries office. Stuckey will manage the Ministerial Information Center, which helps place ministers in congregations. Stoltzfus will be pastor to conference ministers. They join **Renee Sauder** in the leadership office; Sauder coordinates ministries to women in leadership.
- **Marjorie Ediger** began September 15 as pastor at First Church, Ramsom, Kan.

## In A Mennonite Voice: Women Doing Theology

**April 30-May 2, 1992  
Conrad Grebel College, Waterloo, Ontario**

Sponsored by  
Mcc Canada-Women's Concerns & Conrad Grebel College

This conference has been organized to provide a forum for Mennonite woman to work on theological issues and to provide a meeting place for women and men who are interested in exploring the emerging theological voices of women. Major presentations will have been informed by the contributions of at least 4-6 other round-table participants. These papers will be available in February for registrants, allowing the conference to be a continuation of a larger dialogue.

***The Pleasure of Our Lives as Text:  
A Rule of Christ for Anabaptist Women***, Melanie May

***Women's History-Women's Theology: Theological and Methodological Issues in the Writing of the History of Anabaptist-Mennonite Women***, Lois Barrett

***Mennonite Women Connecting Faith & Practice***, Gayle Gerber Koontz, moderator; Lisa Schirch-Elias/Native Issues; Rosalee Bender/Disabled & Third World; Dorothy Friesen/Racism; Mary Anne Hildebrand/Domestic Violence; Kaye Rempel/Poverty.

***Towards a Mennonite Feminist Approach to the Bible***, Lydia Harder

***Sharing Our Stories***, Katie Funk Wiebe  
***Worship Celebration***, Patty Shelly

### Pre-Registration

Lodging & Meals (3 nights double occupancy/6 meals)	\$100.00
Conference Registration (includes papers in February)	\$40.00
(\$60 after Jan. 31)	

Please send your check to: **Women Doing Theology  
c/o Conrad Grebel College  
Waterloo, Ontario N2L 3G6**

For more information call Chris Stickle: (519) 885-0220 ext 223

## News and Verbs

An East Coast conference on family abuse will be January 23-25, 1992, in Mount Joy, Pa. Called "Facing Family Abuse: From Darkness to Light," the event is for survivors, caregivers, pastors and professionals. It is being planned by MCC Women's Concerns and MCC East Coast, Lancaster Mennonite Conference Family Life Commission, Philhaven Hospital, Brethren in Christ Board of Brotherhood Concerns, and the host congregations, Cross Roads Brethren in Christ and Mount Joy Mennonite Churches. For information contact Cross Roads Brethren in Christ Church, 800 Donegal Springs Rd., Mount Joy, PA 17552; (717) 653-1616.

- MCC Women's Concerns desks facilitates a **Network for Adult Survivors of Abuse**. The address of this network has moved from Winkler, Man., to Akron, Pa. Those wanting more information on the network should write to: Tina Mast Burnett, Women's Concerns Desk, P.O. Box 500, Akron, PA 17501-0500.

- Jennifer Lindberg, VS worker in San Antonio, Tex., initiated a project to create an enormous mural to include cut-out pictures of 100,000 people. The 100,000 figures will represent the more than 100,000 people who died in the Persian Gulf War (early U.S. estimates were of 100,000 dead; more recent estimates are 200,000-300,000 dead). The finished mural will consist of 450 panels, each containing about 250 pictures. Those interested in helping with the project may contact Jennifer at VS unit, 602 Mission St., San Antonio, TX 78210.



Illustrations in this issue were drawn by Teresa Pankratz of Chicago. Please do not reproduce without permission.

- Kate Myers is coordinator of the **MCC Global Family Program**, which pairs North American sponsors with individuals or families overseas. She succeeds Lois Keeney.
- Miriam Krantz, Mennonite Board of Missions worker in Nepal, has received a **Medical Literacy Award from the Nepal Medical Association** for co-authoring the book, *Child Nutrition and Health*.
- Janet M. Stutzman is **director of alumni and parent relations** at Eastern Mennonite College, Harrisonburg, Va. She succeeds Shirley E. Yoder.
- Kathy Bergen, long-time worker in West Bank, has been named executive director of the **International Coordinating Committee for Non-governmental Organizations on the Question of Palestine**. The committee was founded in 1983 during a U.N. conference on Palestine.
- A listing of **peace books for children** is available from Provident Bookstores, 616 Walnut Ave., Scottsdale, PA 15683.
- An 8-minute **peace video for children**, "Children Creating Peace," is available from Mennonite Central Committee. It features a children's peace festival in Calcutta, India.
- The Worldwatch Institute has produced a booklet called "**Women's Reproductive Health: The Silent Emergency**." Worldwatch is a non-profit resource organization created to do education on global problems. Order Worldwatch paper No. 102 for \$5 from the institute, 1776 Mass. Ave. NW, Washington D.C. 20036-1904.

WOMEN'S CONCERNS REPORT is published bimonthly by the MCC Committee on Women's Concerns. The committee, formed in 1973, believes that Jesus Christ teaches equality of all persons. By sharing information and ideas, the committee strives to promote new relationships and corresponding supporting structures in which men and women can grow toward wholeness and mutuality. Articles and views presented in REPORT do not necessarily reflect official positions of the Committee on Women's Concerns.

WOMEN'S CONCERNS REPORT is edited by Kristina Mast Burnett. Layout by Janice Wiebe Ollenburger. Correspondence and address changes should be sent to Kristina Mast Burnett, Women's Concerns, MCC, P.O. Box 500, Akron, PA 17501-0500.

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